

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 32nd SUNDAY (A)

Wisdom 6: 12-16 Psalm 63 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18 Matthew 25: 1-13

By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

In parishes there are many ministers who get involved in wedding preparations: musicians, marriage coordinators, clergy, counselors, etc. Couples have to arrange for marriage preparation courses and interviews before they can have a church wedding. With so many divorces these days, we are doing our best to help couples enter into their new lives as prepared as possible. But there is a lot more that has to be done to prepare for a wedding. I bet a lot of us have had a family wedding in the past year, so we have first-hand experience of the enormous amount of details that have to be worked out.

A hall has to be rented—well in advance. At a parish I was at recently there was a wedding at 3:30 on a Friday afternoon. It seems the couple couldn't find an available place for the wedding reception since most were booked well over a year ahead of time. Invitations have to be designed and printed; guest and seating lists made out; a band or disc jockey chosen; food selected; hotel reservations or accommodations for out-of-town visitors; a honeymoon spot chosen and travel plans made, etc. You get the idea.

In today's parable, taken from another time, the wedding arrangements seem strange to us moderns. The customs were very different. The marriages were arranged by family elders and kept within the families and tribes. First there was the betrothal period that took place in the home of the bride's family. A contract was made between the groom and the bride's father, but the bride would stay in her father's house until the groom came to claim her and take her to his home. So, there was a delay until all the planning and negotiating were completed. When all was settled the wedding party would process to the groom's home and begin the feasting. The ten young women in today's parable were not bridesmaids, but would have been relatives and friends of the groom. They were expected to go out to greet the bridegroom. (Cf. Barbara Reid's, PARABLES FOR PREACHERS—YEAR A. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001, Page 193.)

We are separated by centuries from the wedding customs in today's parable. But you can sense that the excitement and anticipation would be similar. The parable

shows that there was a strong element of suspense about the arrival of the groom. (I guess there is suspense for us moderns too as families await the final bills from caterers, chauffeurs, gown designers, etc.) Jesus, as usual, used the common experience of his hearers to tell us something about our lives and our relationship with God and one another.

That's what parables do. They are slice-of-life stories that sound like the lives of Jesus' hearers. To get his message across Jesus uses parables and does what good story tellers do; he exaggerates, embellishes and even includes a few improbable details. For example, in today's parable where would the unprepared young women buy oil at midnight? And why don't the wise ones share with those in need? One thing seems clear, Jesus' purpose in telling the parable is not to make a point about sharing or being charitable. He has something else in mind. So, we can let go of such questions and wait for another gospel tale to cover those points.

The parable is more about being prepared and our relationship with God. We lead such busy lives and some things get put on hold. I have a friend who trusts that his mother is praying for him since he hasn't done that for a while. Some of us say that when we retire we will have more time for retreats, quiet reflections, some good books, more prayer, etc. In the light of all we must do each day and all our responsibilities, those are reasonable excuses. Unfortunately life doesn't always provide us with lots of time. We may have life insurance policies; but our policies don't keep us from emergencies.

The parable is stressing our being prepared for the twists life can take that test or probe our inner strength and resources. The parable asks us to look into where we are investing ourselves and, by using a vivid story to get us to pay serious attention, asks us: When we need it, will we have the oil to see us through a serious moment in our lives? Will we have enough oil to light our way in the darkness that a crisis can cause? Will we have enough oil to strengthen our resolve to make changes in our lives that are difficult and we've been putting off for too long? Will we have enough oil to fire our courage to seek help from a spouse, friend or professional person to deal with a problem we haven't been able to handle ourselves? Will we have enough oil to energize us to bridge a gap and seek forgiveness before a once-warm relationship dies from the chill? The parable isn't about sharing oil; it's about being ready and well-equipped to do what we must do in our lives as Christ's followers.

What's the bottom line? What does the oil symbolize for each of us? One thing the oil suggests is that we need to look to our relationship with God for the light, inner strength and resolve to live out our Christian lives in a world where darkness threatens to overwhelm us. How could we ever grow as human beings and stay faithful to our calling without our relationship with God growing and remaining vibrant? Like any relationship ours with God requires attention, lest it dwindle and dry up from neglect. The recent baseball season reminds us that with God there are no pinch hitters to step up to the plate to hit for us when life throws curve balls at us. We turn to others for help and guidance from those more experienced in God's ways; but each of us is responsible ourselves for how things are between God and us.

Mom's prayers can help, but we need to check the oil in our own lamps. At a crucial moment, we can't run out and borrow the oil from someone else. "My wife, she does the praying for the both of us." "My father is a real man of faith." True, but that's not what the parable tells us today. The parable warns us the bottom line is that we are the ones accountable and can't be lulled into thinking there is no hurry to look soberly at who we are now. No, the parable isn't about sharing and being charitable; it's about being responsible to how we are living the lives we profess in our baptismal promises. The next time we are at a baptism we could pay special attention to the ritual and make it our own. When the presider questions the godparents and parents asking them, on behalf of the child, if they reject sin, the glamor of evil and the prince of darkness, we might answer those questions ourselves and promise to keep a good supply of oil in our lives (Cf. Quotable, below).

We live full, busy and very complex lives. But all that doesn't have to overwhelm us, if we have focus on what we are doing, where we are going and if we are checking our oil supply regularly. We Christians have priorities that should not be determined or overly influenced by the whims and wants of the world around us. Our being attentive and receptive here at Eucharist is one response we can make to the parable. We pray that we not only have enough oil for when we experience the darkness all of us go through at one time or another, but that the oil burns brightly enough to set good example for our children and the next generation who look to us to be "lights of the world."

CD AVAILABLE:

"FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL

YEAR B” This compilation, from past “First Impressions” includes two reflections on almost all Sundays and major feasts for the upcoming liturgical year. For more information and to purchase go to: <http://judeop.ispraleigh.com/> Or, send \$25 (Dominican Friars of Raleigh) to: Preaching Resources Domini P.O. 12927 Raleigh, NC 27605

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Paul J. Philibert, O.P., THE PRIESTHOOD OF THE FAITHFUL: KEY TO A LIVING CHURCH. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005, (www.litpress.org) Vatican II reminded us that the baptized are a “holy priesthood.” United with the Eucharist, they offer sacrifices to God through their faithful living of the Gospel. This book draws from New Testament sources to highlight the priesthood and mission of the laity. Philibert calls the laity to reflect on their daily live and see themselves as a “priesthood of the ordinary.” This book reminds us of the priesthood of the laity and the clear identification of the church as a community of the baptized. We ordained preachers need to read this book to help us avoid the elitism and clericalism we so easily slip into in our lives and especially our preaching.

QUOTABLE

The real story behind the mystery of baptism is the story of two works that coincide in Christ and in those who choose to become his disciples and to live in him. The world that is passing away and the world that is coming to be—the earthly and the heavenly—paradoxically coincide in the church and in each of the baptized. The paradox is that the dynamics of earth and heaven maintain their very different characteristics—one visible, the other invisible; one evident, the other hidden—despite their actual unification in the Christian life. What St. Paul promised to his Christian converts in Corinth is what he called “the first installment” of the gift of the Spirit (2 Cor 1: 22; 5: 5). The presence of the Holy Spirit of God in their lives would cleanse, heal, strengthen and direct them through the choices and the duties of their lives, but it would not offer them an escape route from the hard toil and sufferings of ordinary life. The Spirit does indeed come and dwell with us, but we in turn are obliged to learn the language and the ways of the Spirit of Jesus.

----Paul J. Philibert, O.P., page 25.

JUSTICE NOTES HUNGER EMERGENCY IN WEST AFRICA

(There seems to be no end to large scale human suffering throughout the world these days. Here is something from Bread for the World)

Approximately one-third of Niger's 11.5 million people are currently facing the prospect of famine, and a further 2.5 million people in the neighboring countries of Burkina Faso, Mali and Mauritania are also at risk. Chronic poverty and hunger has left many families with few available resources to face the region's recent droughts and locust infestations. This summer, large numbers of people in rural areas have been eating only leaves and grass.

Bread for the World works to address the root causes of hunger and famine, and help communities find long-term solutions. One of the tools in place to assist people facing food crises is the Bill Emerson Humanitarian Trust which was a provision of the 1998 Africa: Seeds of Hope Act. The trust allows the U.S. president to have immediate access to the national grain reserve whenever a genuine food crisis presents itself. The Africa: Seeds of Hope Act was the product of Bread for the World's 1998 Offering of Letters.

For more information on how to contribute to emergency relief efforts in Niger, please visit our Web site at www.bread.org.

----"Bread: The Bread for the World Newsletter, September 2005

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"Can you imagine what it's like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it's like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, 'I love you. I'll see you next week,' when you never know if they're going to call and say, 'He's up next—it's time for his execution.'"

----Jeanette Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

Glenn E. Chapman #0072845 (On death row since 11/16/64)

Daniel Cummings #0095279 (12/16/94)

Marvin E. Williams #0443375 (1/25/95)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Two new CDs Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS PREACHING REFLECTIONS”**
“Liturgical year A,” which begins in Advent and contains **three** reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts for the year. It also has book reviews and additional essays related to preaching.

“Liturgical years, A, B and C,” reflections on the three-year cycle.

If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process. Individual worshipers report they also use these reflections as they prepare for Sunday liturgy.

You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes “First Impressions” and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.

4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or, go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>
Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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